

ST. LAWRENCE RIVER AND LAKE ONTARIO.

Interviews by

WILLIAM WAKEHAM AND RICHARD RATHBUN.

1893.

NOTES BY RICHARD RATHBUN.

September 20, 1893.

Prescott, Ont., Dr. T. R. Melville, Druggist.

Ogdensburg, N. Y., Harvey Wood, Customs Inspect

The only market fishery in this region is for sturgeon, which is carried on solely on the American side of the St. Lawrence River, mostly in deep water along the outer side of a shoal, which runs parallel with the shore in front of Ogdensburg. Use night lines, or trawl lines, to catch them. Meat, such as beef, pork, etc., is used as bait. They are set day and night. There is no law relating to this fishery, and it is continued more or less during the open season on the river, opening later and closing earlier than the navigation season, as the beginning and close of the season is too boisterous for fishing. The fishing season is considered to be from about April 15 to November. There are 5 or 6 men about Ogdensburg who engage in this fishery. Thought they

might employ 500 or 600 hooks each, but this is a wild estimate.

Melville & Wood gave us to understand that this was quite a fishery, but judging from what we learned later the same day in Brookville, it possibly may not amount to very much. The fishermen should be seen and questioned.

The length of the ground resorted to for sturgeon may be about 1 1/2 miles. The fish are mostly shipped to Montreal. The sturgeon are still rather common, and attain some size. The lines are baited morning and night.

As a whole, not much change in the abundance of fishes in this region.

Black bass, numerous,

Pickereel, less plenty,

Pike, very common,

Maskalonge, taken once in a while.

Some whitefish (?) occur in the spring.

They take them with bait. (Melville).

Very good fishing for bass, and it is much carried on.

Catfish, 2 kinds, bullheads and channel cats.

Chubs,

Suckers,

Eels,

Thinks bass fishing has improved, but not so many pickerel and sturgeon as formerly (Melville).

Pickerel and pike are caught all through the year, but the best time for pike is in the spring before the weeds get up.

Best bass fishing occurs the latter part of September (This does not agree with what we heard in Brockville). Bass spawn in May.

They run up the creeks for this purpose. The close season is very well observed by fishermen. Bass are larger than they were a few years ago. Bass fishing begins earlier up the rivers than at Prescott. (This must refer to New York

laws). Occasional salmon trout taken about here; one this summer (probably mistaken identity). Best bass fishing where current is rapid. Bass fishing is carried on all through the river (Melville).

Much fishing for bass and maskalonge among the Thousand Islands.

Sturgeon go up the tributary river which enters the St. Lawrence at Ogdensburg. They are soon intercepted by a dam. They used to catch them at this place with scoops, drags and gaffs, and do still to some extent (Wood).

Bass, pickerel and pike are the species most taken by sportsmen, and there is a good deal of this fishing. The bass are very fine in this region. Take large ~~Sua~~^{Sua} bass occasionally. No salmon trout occur here. Does not see any perceptible difference in the abundance of fishes. Used to employ drag seines in this region, but not allowed to do so now. Suckers are on the increase (Wood).

New York law allows bass fishing to begin June 1. The Canadian, June 15. This difference leads to some illegal fishing, and causes some dissatisfaction. The seasons end the same. Thinks the laws should be uniform on both sides. (Melville).

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Mr. David Booth, Mayor of Brockville, Ont.

September 20, 1893.

A great huntsman and fisherman. Spends a large part of his time in these sports.

Much fish is shipped away from Mallorytown Ont., a short distance above Brockville. It is taken by the Cape Vincent and Buffalo Fish Companies.

Does not think net fishing should be allowed anywhere in the river. If the river were protected for a few years, the fisheries would be restored to about as good condition as ever. Very much poaching is carried on on the river.

30 to 40 years ago a man could go out in an afternoon and catch anywhere from 50 to 100 good black bass. Maskalonge have also decreased greatly.

In Charlestown Lake, back of Brockville,

bass have also greatly decreased, although there is good fishing now. The lake being now carefully protected. Whitefish have been planted in this lake, but they are no good there, as they cannot be taken with a hook. Some netting still goes on in the lake, although they have an enspector.. The lake is 12 miles long and 7 miles broad. It empties into Canonque River.

Never heard of brook trout in streams about here.

Bass fishing in the river has been much better this spring than for some years. Several large maskalonges (35-60 lbs.) have been taken about here the past few days.

Has seen many hundred gars collected together along the shore of Black Lake and supposed they were spawning. Does not recall at what time of year. This species occurs to some extent in the main river. Have been taken measuring 4 feet. They are very

destructive to young fish.

Has seen one harbor seal in the river here. It was afterwards caught in a net at Cedar Island, 12 miles up the river, where the skin is now preserved.

Spoke of a sturgeon, weighing 41 pounds, a year or two ago, jumping into a small row boat, just at dusk. It jumped over the shoulder of a man sitting in the boat and landed in the bottom. This occurred at Brockville, and the name of man was given.

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Paul Derosia, Brockville, Ontario.

September 20, 1893.

Has lived here 17 years. In the fish business, selling. Does practically no fishing here except for sport.

Sturgeon caught about here shipped to New York. Very little sturgeon fishing about here, and very few taken. There are 2 men in Brockville who, during the past 2 years, have set night lines occasionally, but not with any regularity. Does not think they have taken more than 50 sturgeon in that time. Use 100-150 hooks to a line, and perch for bait. Previous to 2 years ago there was even less of this fishing done about here. Some sturgeon fishing is done about Jones' Creek. Thinks perhaps a little more than here, but not much. The fishery as far as his knowledge goes, is of recent origin.

On the American side has heard of only one

man this year who has fished about 2 1/2 miles below Morristown. Has been fishing since spring, and has had better success than on Canadian side. The grounds are better on that side. The channel and deeper water occur on Canadian side. This man gave up his sturgeon fishing during haying time, as he could make more money working for the farmers.

Gill nets are not used openly in this region. Seines are not used at all.

No hoop nets are used below Jones' Creek, and no license can be obtained for them lower down.

One man has had the exclusive privilege in Jones' Creek. Set last year and the year before. Thinks he had 3 nets. Made it pay for a time, but the fishing became so poor that he has not set his nets this summer. At least they have not been down recently. The creek is shallow and weedy, only 4 or 5 feet of water, and only fishes of a certain kind go in.

The nets were set for bullheads. Besides these, obtained mostly suckers, which are not much thought of, and probably also pike and bass, but the last is not supposed to lead into a net.

The fact that this man no longer sets his nets he considers to prove that the fishing pays no longer. There are not many bullheads now in that creek, and the nets are very likely to be responsible for catching them up. Thinks this man did not set more than the 2 years.

(The Dore is the wall-eyed pike.)

Mr. Derosea has the fish market of Brockville. It is supplied almost exclusively from distant fishing grounds, Lake Superior, Georgian Bay, etc. Buys a few fish caught with hooks and by trolling about Grenadier Island, but from no other local source, and is confident that if other fish were caught for market they would come to him to sell. From

this fact he considers that there is no local market fishery except that above noted. He used to buy from the man in Jones' Creek.

This is also a very poor sport fishing region in his estimation. The river runs straight and swift here, with no bays, etc. There is better fishing after passing above ^U Union Park, or Jones' Creek.

Does not know of any market fishing on the New York side except for sturgeon. He supplies the hotel in Morristown (Frontier House) with its fish. Some nets and lines are set in Chippewa Bay, about 12 miles up.

There are no good places for spawning in this part of the river, directly about here.

Has noticed no marked difference in general, in the abundance of fishes in this part of the river during the past 17 years. There are more small pike this year than he has ever noticed before, which he thinks means they are increasing.

Was out fishing all yesterday afternoon.

Took 17 perch, 1 black bass. Same this afternoon, 24 perch, 1 bass. (This does not look well for the bass.)

They get best bass fishing about July 1. Is best on the American side. About July 1, 1893, went about 5 miles up on American side and caught 35 bass in one afternoon.

In the spring, when fish are scarce, perch sell well, but not at this season.

Bass spawn in May, June and July. Are mostly through by June 15, but may take a few ripe ones even later than July. The bass spawn in the main river, on and about the shoals and grassy spots, and thinks they also go up the streams to spawn. The fishing for them in river is limited to depths less than 15 to 20 feet. Thinks June 15 about the proper time to terminate the close season for bass, and thinks it only fair to have the same regulations on both sides. The Canadians, to

some extent, fish on the American side earlier in the season.

The dore spawns in April and May. Runs up the small rivers and creeks for this purpose. Cited his knowledge of this fact at Belleville.

Pike run up the creeks to spawn as soon as the ice is out. Thinks they even go up before the ice is wholly out.

Perch spawn early like the dore (pickerel) and pike.

Has observed no sunfish in the main river below Jones' Creek.

Ling or cusk is abundant, but not fished for. Taken when setting for eels, and also on sturgeon lines. Occurs everywhere in this part of the river.

The channel cat occurs abundantly in Chippewa Bay, Less common in the main part of river. They run in the swift water, and

river channels. Sometimes taken on sturgeon lines.

The sturgeon are caught mostly in depths of 15 to 30 feet.

Never heard of the sea salmon anywhere in the upper part of the river, or in Lake Ontario

"Shad" (planted by Seth Green) were plentiful last year and the year before. Not so common this year. Most abundant in June. They go in schools, and are seen in large numbers at the surface. During the 2 or 3 years preceding this year, they were seen dead at the surface in large numbers, in June and about July 1. They drifted on to the shores. Saw them dying, swimming or darting about on their sides, etc. Saw no signs of disease about them.

So little netting is done about here that it would cause no special inconvenience if prohibited entirely by law. At this time of year, moreover, the nets do not fish well.

Nets (hoop nets) were once used to a very great extent about Grenadier Island. This year there are not over $1/2$ dozen there. They formerly took in them pike and bullheads and a few bass.

Mr. Derosia is not specially acquainted with the river above Grenadier Island. No fish are brought down from there to sell to him, and he therefore thinks they are not catching much there.

Dynamite has been used by poachers in this region during 8 or 9 years past. There was a dynamite factory here, which made it convenient to get the stuff, but its manufacture has been discontinued. Lately has not been employed so much, but heard that it had been used this season on the American side between here and Chippewa Pt. Several persons were caught last year using it near Morrisburgh, Ontario, They were fined. They have been constantly watched, but it is difficult to catch them in

the act. In using the dynamite, they light a fuse, which does not extinguish in the water. Thinks many fish are destroyed which never come to the surface.

Where poaching is carried on here, thinks it is done mostly to supply the poachers themselves, as he never hears of their offering the fish for sale.

Netting is well watched on the Canadian side from Alexander Bay down, especially during the spawning season of the fish.

(On the American side the inspection is made between Cape Vincent and Chippewa Bay by the American Anglers Association, of which the Secretary is W. H. Thompson, Alexander Bay, N. Y.

This association is made up of wealthy Americans, and their oversight is thorough.

G. M. Skinner, Clayton, N. Y., is one of the best posted men respecting the fishes of the St. Lawrence River.

L. Southworth.)

Mr. Southworth says, Mr. Mooney, a wealthy man who acts as an overseer for the Canadian side of the river and lives near Prescott, started out Sept. 12, on an inspection trip up the river. Between Brockville and Ganongue he discovered and took possession of 28 gill nets. He returned home to-night.

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L. Southworth, Brockville, Ontario.

September 20, 1893.

Sportsman.

The fish found in the ^{St. Lawrence} river here are the
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following:

Black bass,

Pike,

Dore, or Pickerel,

Perch,

Rock bass,

Sunfish,

Maskalonge, few

Suckers,

Chubs

Bels,

Sturgeon,

Bullheads, red flesh,

Channel catfish, white flesh,

Seth Green shad.

Only sturgeon and bullheads are regularly fished for the market. The capture of the former does no harm to the sport fishing or to the other kinds of fish, but that of the latter does.

Sturgeon are all taken with night lines and dead bait, and they are fished for in deeper waters. No other species except an occasional channel cat, will take the dead bait. In this way no interference is made with the other fishing, and the sportsmen are not concerned as to the capture of this species.

Sturgeon fishing is carried on in this region on both sides of the river. Only 2 or 3 persons in Brockville engage in it. One of these is Paul Derosia. The fish are sent to New York. Have to obtain a license for this fishing. Sturgeon have been caught here weighing up to 105 and 110 pounds. No other devices than the night lines are used for sturgeon about here. Could not say anything

about their relative abundance as compared with other years, but they are still common. Knew of their being used only for meat and spawn.

Bullheads furnish the only other legitimate market fishery. A law was passed some 2 or 3 years ago, allowing men to use hoop nets in catching bullheads on the Canadian side. If the catch were limited to bullheads it would not be unfavorably regarded by the sportsmen, but they claim that all other kinds of fish occurring in the same places get into the net. There is no one on hand to see them culled out when the nets are hauled, and consequently all the other fishes are marketed as well. They claim that this has caused a very perceptible decrease in the abundance of these other fishes. The hoop nets are not set out in the river, but in the side streams and at their mouths. Jones' Creek, 7 or 8 miles above here has very many, which has destroyed the fishery in the creek and off its mouth.

Much secret fishing is done, but could not describe it.

Much dynamiting has been going on for some years. It may be carried on at any time of the season or day. A close watch is kept by the poachers, and as there are no guardians at hand, they have no trouble in doing their work, and if any one approaches they can readily escape to the other side of the river. He has seen the results himself in coming upon lots of dead perch brought to the surface by their explosions, and he has seen the men escaping, but has never seen them fire the charge.

Thinks dynamiting has been most destructive to pike (the species called pickerel in New York).

Black bass are generally done spawning in the St. Lawrence River by June 15, but it depends somewhat upon the temperature, the water warming up earlier some years than others. June 17, 1890, cut open 38 bass which he had

taken in the River on that day. Found only 1 specimen still with eggs. A large proportion of the specimens were females. They spawn earlier in some of the side streams and lakes, where the water gets warmer earlier. Cited Black Lake, N. Y., side, which is a great natural breeding ground for fish. The N. Y. laws allow them to fish in this lake after May 5; ^{later, June 1, in the river,} but still earlier there than on Canada side, which offers opportunities for illegal fishing. A recent Canada law has extended the close season to June 30. Thinks that if the open season began June 15 on both sides that it would be much better and that the fish would be fully protected thereby. However, the bass would not take the fly in Black Lake as late as June 15.

Fly fishing for bass has practically been abandoned for 5 or 6 years. Now use live bait, and a special contrivance called "Devon bait" or "minnow." He has used the ^{latter} former

with much success in the early part of the season, when the bass are more apt to seek the shallower and warmer waters along the sides of the river. At this time there are supposed not to be many minnows around, and the bass live largely on crayfishes. They will not readily take live bait at this time, but the Devon bait, a metal contrivance with several hooks, is supposed to simulate the action of crayfishes in the water, and to be mistaken for them. Later in the season they pay no attention to this bait, but require live bait or spoon.

Pike and maskalonge are the only other fishes which are fished for with the rod.

Bass, pike, perch, catfish, bullheads and eels are marketable at any time of the year. Suckers and chubs are not much thought of here. Perch are an exceedingly good fish at all seasons, but they are pirates and devour much spawn.

Bass fishing has deteriorated in this region 50 per cent in past 15 years. Pike are also less common, but are still plenty. In the river near Jones' Creek, however, they have greatly decreased both in abundance and size, within a few years. He lays this to the number of hoop nets in Jones' Creek. This creek is on the Canadian side.

Hoop nets are fished nearly all winter. While they would occasion no harm if their catch was limited to bullheads, they do, in fact, take large numbers of other and better kinds.

Do not use any gill nets in the river so far as he knows.

"Shad" will sometimes take the fly.

The moon fish sometimes taken about here, Has caught several in Jones' Creek.

Gar pike and mud fish occur in Black Lake, N. Y.

There are only 2 or 3 men about Brockville,

who do nothing else but fish, and the market fishery amounts to very little here. He thinks that no one can be considered to be entirely dependent upon fishing for a living.

An immense amount of fishing is done about the Thousand Islands.

A friend with Mr. Southworth used to fish with nets at this place. He was not so certain that fish had become so much more scarce, although he yielded very much to Mr. S's argument. He thought they had learned by experience, or some way, to evade the hooks of the sportsmen. He first said that he thought if nets were still allowed he might be able to catch as many as ever, but he afterward qualified this statement. He said that it had been within his experience that fish had learned to evade or pass around certain nets placed for sometime in the same place.